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Cut South Korea's Umbilical Cord

By Doug Bandow

Although South Korea has been shaken by allegations of financial misconduct by the brother of former President Chun Doo Hwan, the nation's transition to democracy is proving to be smoother than many people expected. Key opposition leaders have reconciled themselves to the ruling party victory in the presidential election late last year.

Nevertheless, President Roh Tae Woo faces several challenges, including earning the support of the nearly two-thirds of the electorate that voted against him, deciding whether to release some 1,000 political prisoners and addressing the concerns of labor and the military.

If any of these issues cause the move toward democracy to stall, Washington will likely be blamed, fairly or not. The United States should disengage itself from Seoul's political and military decisions. It can start by withdrawing the 40,000 American troops based there — military protection that Seoul no longer needs.

The United States has been tied to Seoul through a mutual defense treaty since 1954. Today, the American soldiers act as a tripwire that insures American involvement in any future war. The Reagan Administration treats this commitment, which costs the United States as much as \$23 billion annually, as irrevocable. But South Korea is now capable of defending itself and the agreement should be adjusted to reflect that.

At the end of the Korean War, South Korea was helpless. It had lost one million people and more than half of its industrial capacity. Per capita income was a bare \$134 a year. But 35 years have passed, and per capita income is now \$2,300, nearly three times that in North Korea.

Moreover, the gap between North and South is growing. Since 1970, North Korea's economy has been stagnant while South Korea's economy has expanded by 8 percent annually, and by 12 percent last year. North Korea's gross national product is less than one-fifth that of the South.

Pyongyang has a larger military because, like most Communist regimes, it invested a disproportionate share of its resources in its military. But since the mid-1970's Seoul has

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outspent its antagonist. Last year, the South Korean Defense Minister, Lee Ki Baik, said his country would reach military parity with the North within three years. Indeed, the South, which could not even produce rifles a little more than a decade ago, is now manufacturing sophisticated aircraft and missiles.

Over the long term, Pyongyang will lose its edge. The Rand Corporation estimates that the North would have to devote 36 to 42 percent of its G.N.P. — more than twice the current share — to the military in order to match the South's annual expenditure.

Another important change since

Let's remove American troops.

the Korean War is the reduced likelihood of Chinese or Soviet involvement in any future conflict. China appears to place a high priority on the peninsula's stability and has indicated it would not support a North Korean invasion of the South, with which Beijing has forged a variety of political, economic and cultural ties.

The Soviet attitude toward the North is more equivocal, but there is no evidence that Moscow wants Pyongyang to start a war or that it would play an active role in one.

Japan, which is ready to surpass the Soviet Union as the world's second ranking economic power, is capable of playing a major role in the defense of East Asia. Japan already provides foreign aid to Seoul. It could also provide military assistance, thereby restoring any safety lost by removing United States troops.

American disengagement would not be risk free, yet no foreign policy is without cost. For decades we have risked a bloody new war, spent billions of dollars annually and backed a succession of unpopular military rulers, all to subsidize the defense of a wealthy trading partner that could protect itself. The real question is not should South Korea be defended, but who should pay for it?

As circumstances change, so should our foreign military commitments. With the apparent emergence of a stable democracy in South Korea, it is imperative that we begin pulling American forces out of the peninsula, and eventually removing Seoul from the American defense safety net. □

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